

Testimony in Support of House Bill 5190
AN ACT CONCERNING TESTING FOR HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS

By Richard A. Radocchia, LCSW
Director of Clinical Services, APNH: A Place to Nourish your Health
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To the distinguished members of the Public Health Committee:

I respectfully submit the following testimony in support of H.B. 5190, *An Act Concerning Testing for Human Immunodeficiency Virus*. I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker for over 31 years, and have worked as a behavioral health clinician in Connecticut throughout my career. In addition, I am a person living with HIV and personally know the importance of early identification of HIV infection. Currently I head up the behavioral health services at APNH: A Place to Nourish your Health (formerly AIDS Project New Haven).

Through my extensive career I have consistently worked with clients who were impacted by HIV/AIDS and many of them have been diagnosed after the development of the effective treatments we now have. In spite of this, they experience great stigma and many have delayed HIV testing for so long they have significantly damaged immune systems, and qualify for the AIDS diagnosis. Even though current treatments are very effective in treating HIV infection, the damage done by virus before detection can impact these people's health in a myriad of ways.

I believe the proposed bill is important because making HIV testing routine and a normal part of medical treatment will identify HIV infections earlier, prevent further damage that the virus could do for these folks, and decrease further transmission of HIV in the community.

My own personal story can illustrate how this bill could have helped me. Even though I had the professional and personal education about HIV, its transmission and the importance of early detection. I experienced a significant period of personal denial of my own risk factors and avoided HIV testing, even though I had medical care for other medical problems. Had I been offered HIV testing as a routine part of my healthcare, I am sure I would have had my HIV infection identified much earlier. As it was, the shame and fear that I had led me to finally obtain an anonymous home test in 2008. When I received my results, and found out that I was HIV+, it took me another month before I went to a medical doctor for treatment. The bloodwork lab results indicated that I had been infected for some time, and that my immune system was significantly impaired. Had I been encouraged to get tested and treatment earlier, I would have been able to prevent the damage done to my body. In addition, I know that my behavior put others at risk of infection, because my own status was not known.

Many think that, because HIV treatments have become so effective, HIV is no longer a major healthcare concern. It is true that even if the person has been infected for long periods of time, and have negative impacts, that the medications do provide amazing results and viral loads very often become undetectable and immune systems do recover. What we often miss is that there are many other negative impacts in a person's health that develop over time. I work with many long term survivors who are now facing multiple health crises. Cardiac conditions and many cancers have been noted frequently. In my own story, I am convinced that my own diagnosis of prostate cancer is indeed connected to my HIV infection.

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and its impact on my immune system while I went undiagnosed.

Therefore, I strongly support H.B. 5190 to help others avoid many of the negative impacts of undiagnosed HIV infection. I urge you to vote favorably for this important bill. Routine HIV testing is an important tool that can help end an epidemic that has been with us for forty years, taken tens of thousands Connecticut lives and added stigma to already marginalized persons. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard A. Radocchia, LCSW
Director of Clinical Services
APNH: A Place to Nourish your Health.